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# MAPPING THE TERRAIN OF BLACK WRITING DURING THE EARLY NEW NEGRO ERA

A YEMISI JIMOH

The literary movement that so many refer to as the Harlem Renaissance remains contested terrain. Even so, the need to periodize and name the movement continues, or for our purposes here there continues to be a need to map the terrain and provide a literary cartography for the New Negro era. As the literary production of the New Negro era came to a close, participants in the literary movement such as Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown, Wallace Thurman, Dorothy West, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, and others offered different accounts of its value, its beginnings, and its end. Beginning in 1947, the historical research of John Hope Franklin brought scholarly attention to the New Negro Movement in literature, and Franklin apparently formalized the appellation “Harlem Renaissance” that has come to define it. Continuing research has expanded the now prodigious scholarship on the New Negro and the Harlem Renaissance. However, very little consensus on key questions of periodization has been established either among participants in the New Negro Movement in literature or the literary and historical scholars who came after them.

A number of eminent historians have periodized the social and political history of the New Negro: notably John Hope Franklin in *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947), Nathan Irvin Huggins in *Harlem Renaissance* (1971), and David Levering Lewis in *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981). The titles of

their books clearly indicate that the focus of their valuable scholarship goes well beyond the literary history. Huggins and Lewis centered their work on the larger political and cultural history as it had occurred in a particular place, Harlem, and Franklin's chapter is but a small part of an historical tour de force of African descended peoples. All three locate the beginning of the era in 1919 with the parade of the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment from downtown to uptown Manhattan. In the 1947 edition of *From Slavery to Freedom*, Franklin engaged the literature very specifically and connected it to the long history of New Negro resistance, making the argument that the literary movement occurred in phases and was ongoing. However, the ninth edition, co-written with Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and published in 2007, does not reflect this idea of an ongoing literary movement. Huggins in his book ends "the innocent Harlem Renaissance" in 1930 (1971, 303). And Lewis, who has borrowed the title of his book from Langston Hughes, ends the New Negro "vogue" with the 1935 Harlem riot (1981, 306). In subsequent publications, Huggins and Lewis shift their periodization, moving back as far as 1917 and in the case of Huggins shifting forward as far as 1935. Both scholars emphasize the social, political, and cultural history and employ markers that indicate those interests. Clearly, these markers provide worthwhile points of interest for examining New Negro literature. Yet to outline the terrain of the New Negro Movement in literature we must examine what the writers produced and determine when they began to present the varied perspectives, ideas, and world of the New Negro in literature, even while recognizing that close examination of the literature reveals differences, tensions, and anxieties among its writers.

Literary scholars similarly find little agreement on the question of periodization. Some follow the divisions set in the well-established social histories; others set their own specifically literary or sometimes even social markers. Speaking to concerns with periodization, Gloria Hull observes in *Color Sex and Poetry* that "women writers are tyrannized by periodization" (1987, 30). While there is certainly room for Hull's concern for the disparate impact of periodization on women, the position taken here is that sexism, which Hull also addresses, together with genre and thematics are central to decades of women's marginalization in scholarship on New Negro literature. Recognizing the importance of the consideration of genre and thematics along with gender in the construction of periodization, Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey (2001) have revised the New Negro literary movement's beginnings to 1916 and the production of Angelina Weld Grimké's play *Rachel* that year. Central to this revised periodization is the play's thematic focus on a woman's choice to remain childless and forego marriage because of racial inequities and the terroristic violence



of lynching. Patton and Honey end the movement with Zora Neale Hurston's landmark novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1937, which addresses issues of domestic violence, women in community, love and sexual desire in a mature woman, including love between an older woman and a younger man. Other accounts of periodization that seek to "undo" the "tyranny" of periodization include Cheryl Wall's "flexible perimeters" for New Negro Literature, which marks the beginning with the publication of James Weldon Johnson's anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in 1922 and ends it in 1941 with Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee's anthology *The Negro Caravan* (Wall 1995, 10–11).

Among literary scholars who provide dates in the first decade of the twentieth century for the New Negro Movement in literature, Sharon Jones selects 1900–40, although she does not discuss in any detail the basis for this periodization (2002, 1). A similarly early date is that set by Michael W. Peplow and Arthur P. Davis in *The New Negro Renaissance* (1975). Using both literary and social criteria and identifying a thematic thread they term "militancy," they argue this literary movement was set in place around 1909 and 1910 with W. E. B. Du Bois's rejection of the "Tuskegee Machine" and his founding of *Crisis* magazine. For Peplow and Davis, Richard Wright's naturalism and the publication of *Native Son* in 1940 signal the end of the New Negro Movement in literature. This periodization, however, primarily identifies active writers during the New Negro era rather than writers participating in a literary movement among New Negroes (1975, xxi–xxiv). Similarly, James Weldon Johnson in his 1922 anthology collects poetry by New Negro era writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and others who would not be considered New Negro Movement in literature writers here or elsewhere. In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), Houston Baker, posits an African American literary continuum along the same lines as Sterling Brown. Baker's continuum begins New Negro literature with Booker T. Washington and ends the movement, as do Peplow and Davis, in 1940 with Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Sterling Brown's New Negro literary continuum extends from the late nineteenth century into the 1970s and is not confined to one location in the United States (1996).

The work of periodization pursued here seeks to mark an important cultural space by identifying a broad range of distinguishing literary, political, cultural, and social characteristics of the New Negro Movement in literature. By bracketing a fixed periodization based on the duration of the broad New Negro era, this approach recognizes that its arrangement of chronology is open to re-positioning in turn. The aim here is not to determine the perceived failure or success of the literary movement or the collective quality of the literary production, a project that would



involve determining by whose standards of success, failure, or quality such judgments would be made. Equally, the point of this essay is not to argue that standards are not useful; indeed, in the appropriate context, delineating standards is crucial. However, the traditional work of the cartographer or surveyor is to establish geographical boundaries or mark property lines. Such boundaries and marks are not permanent. They are visible outlines that enable language to refer to the space designated. The space marked here for the New Negro Movement in literature is not merely geographical and temporal; the stakes being set in this project will identify multiple spaces of inquiry. The New Negro Movement in literature, for instance, was in close proximity to and engaged in multiple intersections with the general concerns of modernity as well as literary modernism during the early decades of the twentieth century. This plural space also situates the New Negro Movement in literature within the larger New Negro era, which engages with the solidarity of Pan-Africanism (Gikandi 2005). This view of the era from multiple spaces expands the boundaries, resituates the stakes, and offers an opportunity for engaging the literary movement in terms that too often are deemphasized or unexplored.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, New Negroes were repositioning themselves to demand different treatment and live different lives than they had in the past. While the challenges lodged by New Negroes comprise part of a long history of resistance, the circumstances of the 1890s and the first two decades of the twentieth century mark a timely moment when social, political, cultural, and historical energies coalesced and made a New Negro era possible. As with the material history of New Negro life, the New Negro writer similarly rejected received notions about black character, ability, and history located at the center of the national narrative on race. The dominant narratives that demeaned black people and that located African Americans outside of political and social equality as well as “civilization” could no longer circulate without challenge. New Negro literature operated as part of an ongoing process toward an epistemological break, functioning intraculturally to reinforce black selfhood and to contest the dominant narrative in terms of its impact among black people. This literature also operated within the larger society to dismantle supremacist logic and its resulting ideologies.

Upon close examination, the term Harlem Renaissance as a reference to the literary movement easily operates as a commonplace designation without specific reference to literature. That is, the idea of a Harlem Renaissance in the arts and letters necessarily opens the movement up to numerous period markers that operate well beyond the scope of literature. For my purposes here, literary arts would include narrative



(novels, short stories, movie scripts, exposition), poetry (poems, song lyrics, librettos), drama, and the non-narrative prose essay. In many ways and for an extended time, the terrain of this literary movement has been marked indiscriminately along with the surrounding and interconnected fields of music, dance, photography, painting, and social history. Scholars interested in the question of locating literature within or outside the Harlem Renaissance may find their work either blissfully easy or unnecessarily difficult. This work is easy when everything written within a particular temporal frame is perceived as operating entirely within the literary movement; difficulties arise with questions that seek to examine just exactly what black writers did that would single their writing out as part of a literary movement. Such questions include: what makes these writers different from their predecessors or, more importantly, different from other writers within their contemporary moment and cultural milieu? Are they moving away from or against the past? Are they challenging their own times, retreating from them, or living joyfully within their moment? If a renaissance, what have they awakened or revived. If a literary movement, how does one identify it? What are its characteristics? When did the movement begin and when did it end? In what follows, I assay possible answers to these questions, which inform my mapping the terrain of African American literature during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Early in the twentieth century, New Negroes cleared a space for African American writers to inscribe their differences in viewpoint, thematics, aesthetics, and so forth into the literature of the United States (Guterl 1999). The emphasis here on literature in no way separates writers from other cultural producers such as painters, dancers, musicians, filmmakers, and photographers, working during the cultural moment many people frequently refer to as the Harlem Renaissance. This literary emphasis merely indicates that by marking the literary terrain alongside other cultural products, we make possible a rich and full understanding of the New Negroes and their art. Indeed, quite frequently for New Negroes, literary art and other art forms operated as intertexts.

Writers who are part of literary movements operate within intersecting social, political, cultural, historical, and literary energies. They recognize and respond to the energies of their moment in a variety of ways, yet are connected through their heightened emphasis on particular aspects of their times. This means that in general and from varying angles, literary movements have relative coherence in terms of literary production, genres, techniques, and objectives, including expressed as well as tacit thematic and aesthetic concerns and other issues related to literary production.



The temporal markers of literary movements ordinarily center on literary events or publications. And participants in literary movements are often self-selected members who coalesce around agreed upon shared energies—such as the English Romantic poets whom New Negro Movement literature writers such as Countee Cullen valued. A literary movement might also operate among disparate writers who engage intersecting social, political, cultural, historical, and literary energies in similar ways for a distinct period; or, indeed, a combination of both approaches to participating in a literary movement could occur. During the well-known African American literary movements, namely the New Negro Movement in literature in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Black Chicago Writers in the 1930s and 1940s, and in the Black Arts Aesthetics Movement (BAAM)<sup>1</sup> in the 1960s and 1970s, the writers and theorists of the movements engaged in both self-selection among themselves and participated as disparate individuals. Clearly, though, the complex experience of artistic production suggests that it is not (and need not) be the case that every writer within the temporal frame of a literary movement, nor everything a writer produces during a literary movement, engages in the social energies of the movement or is to be judged a part of it.

Among the theorists of the aforementioned literary movements, the ideas and concepts informing their aesthetic theories have emerged primarily in three ways:

1. The project of theorizing their art has occurred while the movement was underway, as was primarily the case for the New Negro Movement in literature (which will be addressed in more detail later): for the Black Chicago Writers it was theorized by Richard Wright (1937), Margaret Walker (1950), and others; for BAAM it was theorized by Larry Neal (1968a, 1968b, 1969, 1971), Carolyn Rodgers (1969), Toni Cade Bambara (1970), Addison Gayle (1969, 1971), Sarah Webster Fabio (1966, 1968, 1969, 1971), Amiri Baraka (1969), Hoyt Fuller (1971), Calvin Hernton (1968), Stephen Henderson (1973), and others.
2. Theorizing these literary movements also has occurred prior to the actual publication or presentation of literature that would express the energies around which the movement's writings would be focused, as in the case of the New Negro Movement in Literature and BAAM. Early conceptualization of New Negro literature occurred in an essay by W. H. A. Moore (1904). Prior to BAAM, such theorizing would have included essays by Julian Mayfield (1960) and Saunders Redding (1960) as well as the ideas of Sarah Wright (1993) and other members of On Guard for Freedom. The latter disseminated their cultural

visions in literary/political workshops, as did Umbra Workshop along with members of the Harlem Writers' Guild and the Uptown Writers Movement.

3. The theorization of literary movements sometimes also results from scholars who locate a concentration of writers' innovations in or coalescing around concerns with literary form, thematics, and aesthetics, or social, political, cultural issues. These scholars theorize the literary movement after it has occurred. This conceptualization of a movement occurs in the scholarship of John Hope Franklin, Eugene Redmond (1976), Darwin Turner (1985), Gloria Hull, Houston Baker, James Smethurst (2011), Charles Jones, Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey, Jr. (2012), Robert Bone, Cheryl Wall, Steve Tracy (2011), and Margo Crawford to name only a few scholars of the New Negro Movement in literature, the Black Chicago Writers, or/and the BAAM.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the New Negro literary movement, concerns with theorizing the art predate as well as coincide with its literary production. This conceptual shaping of the literary movement by New Negroes has combined with scholarship that has theorized the movement after it had ended. W. H. A. Moore was among the early New Negro writers seeking to shape a literary movement. Moore published "The New Negro Literary Movement" in the *A. M. E. Church Review* in 1904, before the New Negro Movement in literature was underway. In his essay Moore expressed concern with the literature of his times and called for a literary movement that would not actually occur for over a decade. Operating at the borders of many movements, then, is ambiguity. When there exists fits and starts toward the moment of movement and/or uneven endings to it, our attempts to locate the breaks become a periodizing endeavor, an analytical and retrospective practice. In this way, we recognize periodization as a construct designed to facilitate critical intellectual engagement of ideas and terms "so that we may know . . . what we mean"; or, to further paraphrase T. S. Eliot's words, so that we may know where we are located (1929, 213–14).

The literary moment referred to as the Harlem Renaissance occurred at a dynamic period within modernism. That moment is reflected in a restatement of William Carlos Williams's words that Laura Doyle and Laura Winkle make in their introduction to *Geomodernisms*: "so much depends . . . on place, proximity, position" (2005, 1). When the place is Harlem, temporally positioned in the early decades of the twentieth century and in close proximity with music, painting, dance,



and political-social movements, so much becomes obscured within the term “Harlem Renaissance,” resulting in boundaries that have led to a constricted view of African American writing in the 1910s and 1920s. If we view the literature and the era in the terms that the writers used to refer to themselves and consider the aesthetic practices that they not only theorized but also that they employed, the writers and the writing take on new shape, expanding the cartography of the literary movement along with the roster of its participants.

Without doubt, the New Negro operates within the larger context of literary modernism in the United States, which ranges from William Carlos Williams’s emphasis on the local to T. S. Eliot’s international modernism—expressed as Western culture’s “Waste Land”—along with transnational movements in Dadaism, Surrealism, and Imagism and multiple other ideas circulating within a modern United States—progressivist, pluralist, nativist (Morrison 2005, 13). In “Rethinking American Modernism,” Mark Sanders posits a “heterodox modernism, in all its iterations . . . react[ing] against the limitations of Victorian epistemology” (2005, 130). In many ways the formation of the United States operates as one of the major fractures of modernity, one of the signal attempts in Western culture to remake the European old world on new terrain and in new terms. In the history of nations and cultures, however, the United States is a relatively new national terrain, yet this nation is firmly within the inheritance of Western culture and its extension of Western history to one of the locations that that history and its historians have named the Americas. Modernism within the context of the United States, then, seems emblematic of the new within the new, the already new looking once again toward reinvention, remaking, rethinking, particularly in the decades immediately following the Civil War.

By the 1890s, a range of concepts of reinvention circulated throughout the national narrative: the New Woman, the New Negro Woman, the post-Reconstruction New South, and the New Negro—this last, after an attenuated attempt at national reconstruction and the reconstructed Negro. This was the era of the “new” in the United States. And the earliest uses in print of the terms the “New South” and the “New Woman” as ongoing metaphors appear to predate a similar use of the term “New Negro” (even though there are ephemeral uses of the phrase). In the case of the New Woman, a debate over terminology ensued in a series of exchanges in *North American Review* in 1894 between Sarah Grand and a reader using the name Ouida. An editorial by Grand challenges middle-class respectability and refers to the “Bawling Brotherhood” who fear that women are “unsexing themselves.” The editorial chides these men for believing they are “all that



is admirable” and reproaches women for falsely propping them up in this error (Grand 2008, 29–34; see Schaffer 2002; Mangum 1999). This New Woman in literature and in society, according to Marianne Dekoven, was “independent, educated, (relatively) sexually liberated,” and moving out from the domestic sphere into the public sphere (1999, 174).

The space of the New Negro Woman, however, did not occupy the same ground as that of the typical New Woman. In “Defending Our Name,” chapter five of *When and Where I Enter*, Paula Giddings notes that black women, as was also the case for white New Women, had to “assess . . . [their] relationship to ‘true womanhood.’” New Negro women, however, did this “by defending the history of all Black women and redefining the criteria of true womanhood” (2008, 85). Indeed the domestic space from which white middle-class New Women sought release was a ground that a number of New Negro Women wished to defend and occupy (albeit not at the expense of education, wages, and individual selfhood), as it did not necessarily have the same explicit cultural restrictions for African American women.

Martha Patterson (2008) attributes the initial use of the term “New Negro Woman” to Margaret Murray Washington in 1895, the same year that the term “New Negro” began circulating regularly in the United States. And while Washington, in an effort to emphasize respectability and purity, is silent on the violence of rape experienced by black women, her contemporary Pauline Hopkins makes the violation of black women an open issue in her fiction and in her newspaper articles, even while continuing to create a space for black women in the “politics of respectability,” to borrow the title of chapter seven of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (1993). As Higginbotham points out, the phrase “the politics of respectability” and its associated meanings have had currency in African American culture well beyond the religious and temporal contexts of her study. Indeed, Harriet Jacobs and Frances E. W. Harper had operated in their writings through similar political and social concerns, as have many black women since the 1920s. The term New Negro Woman, therefore, marks crucial differences in history, particularities of culture, and social realities in black women’s experiences that may diverge from New Women and New Negro Men while simultaneously intersecting both (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2002). The New Negro Man and the New Negro Woman collaboratively challenged the United States, questioning the nation’s and Western culture’s claims to exclusivity of achievement, “civilization,” morals, intelligence, and so many other concerns.



The New Negro, then, operated during a period when some forms of Western or international literary modernism challenged notions of “civilization” by questioning received ideas and certainties as well as common assumptions and conventions. These forms of modernism represented cultural crisis through anxieties over a seemingly crumbling “civilization” and the fractured consciousness of self within it. New Negro era writers recognized, however, that decades earlier their predecessors had experienced fractures from old world African cultures, and realized that their own position in the received narratives of Western culture was diminished by those narratives and was tenuous at best. For them, the very fissures and epistemological breaks that created a generalized Western cultural anxiety (especially the Civil War in the United States) opened up an immense opportunity in turn for challenging many of the very ideas and ideals that were being revised and made anew in Western culture.

In the United States, the proliferation of racial pseudo-science and the emphasis on exclusive definitions of “civilization” found an echo in some modern writers’ representations of black people (including William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Marianne Moore, and Gertrude Stein), which constituted reformulations of (or an inability to imagine far beyond) subordination, primitive exoticism, and systems and structures of supremacy that were at the center of the New Negro contestation of modernism. It was not only moderns such as Yeats, Pound, Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, and Stein who experienced the world in new ways and believed that the old ways of explaining reality no longer held: the New Negro was also modern in this way. While African American culture informed a Jazz Age for the alienated Lost Generation in white America, W. E. B. Du Bois had in 1903 already begun to set forth an analysis of the modern New Negro in *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>4</sup> Rather than operating simply through the impetus to “make it new,” modern black writers of the New Negro Movement in literature found that they were indeed happy to abandon their immediate past—except within the context of family—and to leave behind their experiences of slavery, exclusion, and violence, although an ancestral past would come to play a role. They found that the term “new” also involved making literature speak to a new political and social justice, a heretofore unrealized and thus new equality, and a newly unveiled selfhood, all of which these writers clearly situated in the actions that black people deployed within the trope of the New Negro.

Definitions of the New Negro occurred as early as January 1894 when Reverend W. E. C. Wright published an article with the title “The New Negro” in *The American Missionary* magazine. His essay was written



a generation after the Civil War and just under two decades following the end of the failed attempts of Reconstruction to bring black people into full citizenship. Wright challenged the invalid stereotypes that had been imposed on enslaved as well as emancipated black people, and he admonished the latter to abandon the traditional masks of servility and subordination. He further called for a “great transformation” of emancipated slaves into “freemen” or New Negroes, and challenged the idea of Christianity being conveyed by enslavers. Wright pointed to successes in education, farming, industry, and business among New Negroes and rejected the then current idea of emigration to Africa (2007, 23–26).

The next year, in June 1895, an editorial appeared in the black-owned *Cleveland Gazette* newspaper that can also be numbered among early descriptions of the New Negro era. The writer refers to the Civil War as an important moment of fracture from the old and then clearly locates the New Negro within middle-class respectability. In this newspaper, then, one description of the New Negro is associated with “a class of colored people . . . with education, refinement, and money” (Meir 1988, 258). Another description of the New Negro occurred that year at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition in the form of Booker T. Washington’s speech on the opening day of the exposition, September 18, 1895. This speech is well known for Washington’s call for black people to cast down their buckets where they were and to remain as “separate as the fingers” within the United States, rather than considering emigration as advocated by activists such as Episcopal minister Alexander Crummel, a vocal opponent of Washington, and Henry McNeal Turner, an African Methodist Episcopal Bishop (Barnes 2004; Redkey 1967). Washington’s approach to the New Negro also rejected active resistance to inequality in the social and political systems and structures of the United States, which contrasted with the approach of New Negroes such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins, William Monroe Trotter, Anna Julia Cooper, and others. One of the numerous voices raised in opposition to Washington’s ideas was that of J. W. E. Bowen Sr., whose speech “An Appeal to the King” delivered in October 1895 at the Atlanta Exposition responded to Washington (2007). Bowen announced that the New Negro had developed a new sensibility and that there was a new generation countering supremacist systems and structures and those who perpetuate them.

Bowen described supremacist logic and those who deploy it through the metaphor of an invisible “king” who controls “legislation,” the “political policy of the nation,” the “police,” and the “supreme courts of the states and of the nation.” He observes that the “great body” of the king’s “law is



unwritten, but they are executed with scrupulous exactness in the minutest detail" (2007, 26). Further, under the developing trope of the New Negro, Bowen announced that a

new Negro has come upon the stage of action . . . [and] he is thinking! . . . His spirit is that of his father's made over. . . This Negro has born in him the consciousness of a racial personality under the blaze of a new civilization. . . With this new birth of the soul, . . . [the New Negro] shall take . . . [a] place in the ranks of one common humanity. (2007, 26, 32)

So the impetus found in the dominant narrative of modernism to make Western culture new is transformed here into respect for predecessors (implicitly mothers and fathers) and for their belief in, as Phillis Wheatley puts it, the "Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance," and as Wheatley further avers, resides "in every human Breast" (Shields 1988, 176–77).

Early New Negroes such as Bowen and others saw the possibility for social and political transformation through activism and literary and visual representations of middle-class respectability. Rather than posit a misguided belief in a "neological utopia" located in the trope of the New Negro (Gates and Jarrett 2007, 4) or in the ability of image and text to change material conditions, one might view such activities as attempts to challenge racialized systems of exclusion and the supremacist cultural logic of "civilization." They were, in the words of Charles W. Mills, creating "alternative epistemologies" for the ways in which the term "negro" operated to create meaning in their society (1998, 2, 21). Perhaps we might understand this through the theories of Frantz Fanon who, while addressing the general similarities of colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean, also cautioned that particularities and differences among peoples of the Black World—including the United States—are crucial. He further acknowledged that those maintaining supremacist systems controlling the lives of black people in the Americas "did not mete out to them any different treatment from that of the [white people] who" had colonized continental Africans. So while analyzing the processes of colonialism and its operations of supremacist logic in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon, the preeminent psychologist of colonial subordination, noted that these processes involve "a kind of perverted logic . . . [that] turns its attention to the past of the . . . [subordinated] people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it" (1978, 210, 215–16).

In this way, we can see how a range of texts and cultural initiatives sought to challenge the various demeaning representations of black people circulating in the United States at this time, including: W. E. B. Du Bois's



photographic exhibit for the 1900 Paris Exposition, *Types of American Negroes, Georgia, USA*; *A New Negro for a New Century* published that same year by Booker T. Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams, and N. B. Wood, which combined image and text; and John H. Adams' photo essays "New Negro Woman" and "New Negro Man," published in 1904 in *Voice of the Negro*, which similarly juxtaposed image and text (Smith 2004; Carroll 2005; Sherrard-Johnson 2007; Goesser 2007). Demeaning representations appeared in the plantation tradition literature of Thomas Nelson Page and others, the minstrel images of popular culture in the United States, the pseudo-scientific race theories of Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard along with the numerous other writers of supposed scientific narratives on race and "civilization." For New Negroes, countering these dominant narratives and images was an ongoing battle throughout the last years of the New Negro literary movement. Between 1927 and 1929 Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois directly challenged these dominant narratives as both engaged Lothrop Stoddard in debates on white supremacy (Guterl 2001, 142–45; Lewis 2000, 235; Harris 1989, 281–83). The New Negro then responded to demeaning images and texts by launching discursive counter-representations (Mercer 2003).

New Negroes regularly encountered demeaning images of black people. An example of such images is evident in Thomas Nelson Page's "The Lynching of the Negro: Its Causes and Prevention," which appeared in the prestigious *North American Review* in January 1904. Page, a supporter of Booker T. Washington, argues that lynching is not "the result of irrational hostility or wanton cruelty" nor of politics; rather, "the ground of complaint" lies "in the utterances of the negroes [*sic*] themselves." Page declares that an "old generation" of black people have given way to the "New Issue" who no longer live under the "well regulated" and supposedly civilizing influences of slavery. This new generation, with some few exceptions, have reverted to type and expressed "deep racial instincts" (i.e. violence, rape, murder). These problems, he declares, result from the errors of Reconstruction and "its teachings," among which was the idea "that the negro [*sic*] was the equal of the white." Page further contends that the "worthy" or "better element" among black people was not to be found among the "New Issue" or its "Prominent leaders: those who publish papers and control conventions" (Page 1904, 34–42).<sup>5</sup> Page's refined, paternalistic, yet bilious, vitriol against New Negroes was replicated with less refinement through the mechanisms of modernism and the power of moving images in 1915 with D. W. Griffiths *The Birth of a Nation*.



The New Negro Movement writers did not operate in a discursive vacuum. During the first decade of twentieth century, they actively contested inequality in the United States as well as pronouncements such as Page's along with social and political activists such as Hubert Henry Harrison and Marcus Garvey.<sup>6</sup> Harrison and Garvey worked both separately and together during their brief coalition under the banner of the New Negro Manhood Movement. Their Manhood Movement was successfully countered by New Negro women given their explicit exclusion in name if not in its work. Additional counter narratives to the disparaging image of the New Negro circulating in the dominant culture include W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Negro* (1915), which presents a history of Africa that places black people at the center of world achievements. And in 1916 William Pickens published a collection of essays titled *The New Negro*. Garvey's newspaper *Negro World*, founded in 1918, regularly published "poetry for the People." August Valentine Bernier's short lived *New Negro* magazine included creative literature (Perry 2009, 8, 372). And Du Bois founded three publications *Moon* (1906), *Horizon* (1907), and then *Crisis* (1910), all of which had regularly published New Negro creative writing. Thus, instead of the trope of the New Negro as a utopian gesture straining toward a non-place, an idealized impossible existence, New Negroes deployed this trope—albeit perhaps with more hope for a reasonable response than history has shown was warranted—in order to mark their ground, making space for black people on existing terrain in the United States and in ways that they saw already operating for others. Indeed, the New Negroes were not merely idle dreamers; they had genuine hope for change and a vision for their own future and the future of the United States.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the New Negro moment promised to bring the ideals of the past to fruition. By 1895 the New Negro era had begun, and was informed by the tension between middle-class ideas of respectability and its allied social process of uplift and more active tendencies to self-definition and explicit resistance (Gaines 1996). New Negro literature followed fifteen years later from various sources across the United States. This New Negro construction of selfhood persisted throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and ultimately took the form of the political and legal actions of the NAACP and the concomitant Civil Rights Movement, including the *Brown vs. Board of Education* lawsuit and its affirmative Supreme Court decisions in 1954 and 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–56), and the various marches and sit-ins of the 1950s and 1960s. This later Civil Rights politics was in the same vein as earlier New Negro political activities such as the Silent March of 1917,



the resistance during the Bloody Summer of 1919, and the proposed (but abandoned) March on Washington in 1941. The New Negro era ended as the Black liberation era of the 1960s initiated another version of black resistance and black representation in the United States, which first found its way into literature as the Black Arts Aesthetics Movement and then expanded into the Black Liberation Movement (Black Power). The long trajectory of the New Negro clearly then encompasses the New Negro Movement in literature.

In the first edition of Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom*, the chapter on the literature of the 1910s and 1920s is titled "A Harlem Renaissance." Franklin clearly indicates that the production of New Negro literature occurred in a number of sites, including Boston, Washington, DC, Houston, Chicago, Lynchburg, Virginia, Los Angeles, Detroit, Cleveland, Louisville, and Nashville among others. He writes that "the scope of the Harlem Renaissance came to be the whole of the United States" (1947, 489, 502–504). Still, the predominant use of the name "Harlem Renaissance" to refer to the New Negro Movement in literature has persisted for over sixty-five years. Participants in the literary movement, both during and after, tended not to make Harlem the center of events. Alain Locke's "preferred name [for the era] . . . was the New Negro Movement" (Harris and Molesworth 2008, 179). In 1940, Langston Hughes used the term Black Renaissance in his autobiography *The Big Sea*. And by 1955 in his speech "The New Negro in Literature (1925–1955)," Sterling Brown, also a participant in the literary movement, challenged the idea of centering the era's name on Harlem. Brown observes that "The New Negro . . . [was] not a group of writers centered in Harlem during the second half of the twenties. Most of the writers were not Harlemites. . . . The New Negro movement had temporal roots in the past and spatial roots elsewhere in America" (1996, 185).

Indeed, Sterling Brown spent most of the New Negro years teaching at various colleges until accepting a permanent position at Howard University. Georgia Douglas Johnson did not live in Harlem, and neither did many others such as Angelina Weld Grimké, Bruce Nugent, Marita Bonner, and Edward Christopher Williams. Less well known now than the other writers mentioned here, Williams, the son-in-law of Charles W. Chesnutt, published a serialized narrative set in Washington, DC.<sup>7</sup> Jean Toomer was also not a resident of Harlem during most of the New Negro literary era and he, too, sets portions of *Cane* (1923) in Washington, DC. Claude McKay spent the years from 1922 to 1934 in Europe and Africa (Lewis 1981, 295). Langston Hughes moved to Harlem from Mexico in 1921 after "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was published in *Crisis*. He set



sail in 1923 and traveled until 1924 to locations in Africa and Europe while working aboard ship. He missed the initial *Opportunity* dinner, and upon his return established residence in Washington, DC until 1926. Hughes was living in Washington when *Opportunity* and *Crisis* awarded him their literary prizes in 1925. By 1926, he had begun attending Lincoln University and lived on campus there until he received his degree in 1929, traveling occasionally to New York on weekends. He subsequently traveled for brief periods to Cuba in 1930 and Haiti in 1931, locations which Hughes apparently believed might bring new energies to his writing by expanding his understanding of black people outside the United States (Rampersad 1986, 106–13, 171–81, 204). Most importantly, however, is the fact that, with the exception of a brief period in 1925 while editing *Survey Graphic* and *The New Negro*, Alain Locke taught at Howard University, and then at other colleges during a forced hiatus from Howard. Thus, he did not live in Harlem during most of the period associated with the New Negro Movement in literature.<sup>8</sup> And while there was a great deal of variety in the terminology for the era—Negro Renaissance, New Negro Movement, New Negro literature, younger Negro artists—it was in people (as individual writers and as a people) and not in any location that contemporary names ultimately focused upon.

Clearly, New York was the publishing center for New Negro writers and for writers in the United States in general. It was also the location where many, yet clearly not all, of the prominent New Negro Power brokers (Du Bois, Jesse Fauset, Charles Johnson, Gwendolyn Bennett, Eric Waldron) had settled by the 1920s. Many of the writers, however, were transient during the Harlem Vogue from 1924 to 1929, which marked the height of the New Negro Movement in literature. Modern technologies such as the telephone, the telegraph, and the railway network, as well as an efficient postal service, meant that continuous residence outside New York was not necessarily a hindrance to literary participation in the New Negro Movement. While the New Negro writers of the 1920s were part of the most vigorous and active moment of the New Negro Movement in literature, scholars have frequently marked this high point as its starting point, and so have elided the connection between the literary movement and the social-cultural history of the concept of the New Negro from the 1890s. George Hutchinson, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, provides useful distinctions for crucial terms that have shaped the discourse on the New Negro era. Hutchinson points to an important distinction, which perhaps has been lost, between Langston Hughes's references to the "Black Renaissance" and the Harlem Vogue or "more broadly a Negro Vogue of international



dimensions. . . . The ‘Vogue’ referred to the interest some whites took in black arts and culture. . . . A critique of the ‘Vogue’ was an essential aspect” of the New Negro Movement in literature (1995, 3–4; see also Lamothe 2008). Arna Bontemps, in his memoir of the literary movement, refers to 1924 as the year that the “so-called” Harlem Renaissance was “publicly recognized” (1).

In terms of the Pan-African internationalism aligned with the literary movement, the New Negro was part of a range of transnational activities, most notably the Pan-African Conferences, the Garveyite movement, and later the Négritude movement. These activities were orientated toward an awakened sense among black people in the United States of connections to the peoples and struggles of a wider Black World, a world that in Fanon’s words “will not hesitate to assert the existence of common ties and a motive . . . that is identical” (1978, 213). This motivation extended to the struggles against colonialism and exploitation pursued by peoples of all races. For the New Negro, this Pan-Africanism constituted what Brent Hayes Edwards terms “transnational black solidarity” or “diasporic solidarity” (2003, 6, 83), and developed without losing the awareness “that every culture is first and foremost national” (Fanon 1978, 216). Édouard Glissant (1997) has expressed this concept of locatedness and multiple connection as relational, a type of solidarity expressed as a critique of roots. Nevertheless, the New Negro writers were operating in a political system that Mills has termed “global white supremacy” (1999, 3). New Negro Movement writers such as Du Bois, Fauset, Locke, and others also made a project of re-connecting black people to positive ideas about Africa, and they simultaneously retrieved the continent from European assessments and cultural expropriation, locating African achievements and African peoples in world “civilization.” Indeed, one might convincingly argue that the proximity of African descended peoples in the Americas to the history and culture of Africa, especially the culture that immediately preceded the dislocations of slavery in the Americas, is chronologically far closer to people in the African Diaspora than is the history and culture of the ancient Greco-Roman world to current Western culture (in which African Americans also participate).

Both cultural pasts are retrieved through reinterpreted fragments. And the benefits of early modern technologies, most especially print culture, have made it possible for scholars such as Michael Gomez to argue that strong evidence exists of ongoing African influences among enslaved black people until at least 1830, by which time, as Gomez has demonstrated, the population of African descended people born in the United States exceeded the numbers for African-born enslaved persons. For Gomez,



“the presence of substantial numbers of native Africans suggests a society more African in culture than not, and consciously so” (1998, 192–95). So, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, on or about sometime in 1915, African American literature changed. And indeed, New Negro literature has a crucial place in African American culture and in the literary culture of the United States. That literature along with, and not instead of, music is part of the New Negro’s Du Bosian gift (Gates 1988, 148).

While some might wish to disengage certain types of New Negro music from the material conditions that produced them, New Negro writers make such uprooting of their literary art a distinct challenge. Even so, to engage deeply with New Negro music without recognizing its context could be viewed as equivalent to suggesting that Billie Holiday’s renditions of “Strange Fruit” reflects her response to the fruit of the prickly pear, or that there is no signifying in Duke Ellington’s *Black, Brown, Beige* symphony. New Negro music was profoundly shaped by African American culture and the history informing that culture, and by ignoring and rejecting the logic operating in African American music and literature one runs the risk of locating black people in the United States outside of a broad range of intellectual achievements. This is to make the cultural productions of the New Negro a spectacle or “a document” of black difference, instead of a cultural product requiring study in order to be grasped in its fullness. Such an approach would again cast African Americans in the national narrative of the United States as merely minstrels or entertainers, as simply “an . . . ‘ethnographic event’” (Edwards 2003, 79). Without doubt, New Negro Movement writers found fertile ground in the modern United States to establish literary roots, and they did make them.

In 1915, the fifth year *Crisis* magazine was in print, W. E. B. Du Bois formed the Drama Committee within the NAACP (Alain Locke was a member) and made a call for “race plays.” That same year, Montgomery Gregory formed the Howard Players, which focused on folk plays and rejected protest and propaganda (Patton and Honey 2001; Perkins and Stephens 1998; Krasner 2007). The Drama Committee received a number of entries for this annual contest and regularly published them in *Crisis*. Angelina Weld Grimké’s play *Rachel*, originally titled *Blessed Are the Barren*, was among the initial responses to Du Bois’s call and in 1916 she won first prize. The NAACP’s Drama Committee staged Grimké’s play in Washington, DC, that year. Alain Locke, who had praised Du Bois’s dramatic pageant *The Star of Ethiopia* (Horne 2001, 54; Hewett 2010), opposed Grimké’s play so vehemently that he resigned from the committee. Du Bois, with the support of Regina Anderson, a librarian at Harlem’s 135<sup>th</sup> Street library, later established the Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists



in 1925 (by July 1926, renamed Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre<sup>9</sup>) and launched a contest offering production of the winning plays along with cash prizes (Pitts 1988). According to Remi Omodele, the editors of the magazine produced and published “*Crisis* Plays” from 1916 until 1929, including Alice Dunbar Nelson’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918), Willis Richardson’s *The Dean’s Awakening* (1920), Myrtle Smith Livingston’s *For Unborn Children* (1926), and Marita Bonner’s *The Purple Flower* (1928), as well as Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel* (1916) (Omodele 2002, 54–61).

Also in 1915, Du Bois revived his massive pageant, *The Star of Ethiopia* (originally *The People of Peoples and Their Gifts to Men*), which he had first staged on October, 23, 1913 in New York to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>10</sup> He took the revival production on the road with performances that first year in Washington, DC, and then Philadelphia in 1916 (Du Bois 1915a, 1915b, 1916). Du Bois brought this pageant back to the stage during the later years of the New Negro Movement in literature with a performance in 1925 in Los Angeles (Krasner 2002, 81–89; Kirschke 2007, 147; Colbert 2011, 48–90). Other plays also appearing during these early years were Mary Burrill’s *Aftermath* (1919), which was published in *Liberator*, Joseph Seamon Cotter’s *On the Fields of France* (1920), and Montgomery Gregory’s “folk” play *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* (1923), performed by the Ethiopian Art Players in Chicago.

From 1915 until 1927, the Negro Little Theatre Movement (along the lines of the larger Little Theatre Movement) added to the production and publication of drama operating in the New Negro Movement in literature. The little theatres began with Montgomery Gregory’s Howard Players and Charles Gilpin’s Lafayette Players in 1915 (Monroe 1983; Miller 2011). In 1916, Du Bois’s productions of the *Crisis* plays had begun (Krasner 2002, 194, 209; Elam 2010). These literary activities operated consciously within the cultural, social, and political energies of the New Negro. Indeed, in the 1920s disagreements over aesthetics would occur and would be similar to the differences in the 1910s (and among some of the same people, no less). Black theatre as part of the New Negro era sought to bring to the stage representations of black life that dispensed with minstrelsy, revalued African American vernacular speech and folk culture, and directly confronted injustice (lynching, laws forbidding supposed miscegenation, unequal citizenship, gender inequity, poverty, unjust incarceration, and much more).

The New Negro Movement in literature, of course, is not the beginning of African American literary art, and the literary themes and formal experiments found in New Negro Movement literature do not necessarily begin with writers producing literature in 1915 (Ikonné 1981). One also



would not suppose that a literary movement is underway simply because there are numerous writers in print. The earlier African American writers, although New Negroes in the sense of its social vision, were not located within a shared set of literary energies in numbers large enough to identify a literary movement as such, although similar social and political concerns abound throughout the wider New Negro era from the 1890s and into the early 1960s. Thus, in addition to Du Bois's pageant, other New Negro literary precursors would include: Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892); Pauline Hopkins' various plays such as *Peculiar Sam* (1880) and novels as well as serial narratives including *Contending Forces* (1900) and *Of One Blood* (1902–1903); Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) and *The Hindered Hand, or the Rein of the Repressionist* (1905); Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry, short stories, and novels, including, just to name a few, *Oak and Ivy* (1892), *Majors and Minors* (1895), *Folks from Dixie* (1898), *The Uncalled* (1898); Fenton Johnson's self-published book, *A Little Dreaming* (1913); and various short stories and novels by Charles Chesnutt,<sup>11</sup> such as *The Conjure Woman* (1899), "The Passing of Grandison" (1899), *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), and *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Chesnutt continued to write during the New Negro Movement in literature (*Paul Marchand*, *FMC*, *Mandy Oxendine*, and *The Quarry*), yet refused to participate in New Negro literary activities in the 1920s. By 1915, however, the number of writers working within or engaged in literary conversations around shared thematic and aesthetic ideas and intersecting social and political energies was already apparent.

Undoubtedly, then, by emphasizing the "vogue" instead of focusing on particular New Negroes and their literary interests, we might overlook intracultural New Negro literature, particularly drama, which received its primary support from black audiences in churches, local libraries, and other venues in black neighborhoods. On stage, the impending, slow, yet for some, welcomed demise of minstrelsy and vaudeville, along with the dearth of work on Broadway before 1921 and *Shuffle Along*, resulted in limited opportunities for black performers. In response, many black actors between 1910 and 1920 had moved toward supporting the development of local theatres in the hope of providing a suitable outlet for their dramatic abilities. There was little desire among them to use their talents in cabaret and dance hall acts. Yet the increasing popularity of film along with small audiences contributed significantly to the end of the Negro Little Theatre Movement by 1929.

Drama, however, was not the only creative New Negro literature available before 1923, when Charles Johnson established *Opportunity* and followed it in the next year with the dinner at the New York Civic Club. Already operating within the energies of the New Negro were writers such



as W. E. B. Du Bois, whose slim volume titled *The Negro* (1915) connected formerly enslaved black people in the Americas to an ancient African heritage. Fenton Johnson had already published two books of New Negro poetry, *Visions of the Dusk* (1915) and *Songs of the Soil* (1915), a short story collection *Tales of Darkest America* (1920), and several stories in *Crisis*; James Weldon Johnson had published *50 Years and Other Poems* (1917) as well as *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), which illustrated the literary achievements of New Negro era poets and others; Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr. had published *The Band of Gideon* (1918); Oscar Micheaux had written and produced *The Homesteaders* (1918); Lucian B. Watkins, according to anthologist Robert Kerlin in *Negro Poets and Their Poems* (1923), was regularly referred to as the “Poet Laureate of the New Negro” before his death in 1921. Watkins had published poems such as “Star of Ethiopia” in *Crisis* (August 1918) and “Because I’m Black” in *Pearson’s Magazine* (March 1919), while his protest sonnet “The New Negro,” appeared posthumously in Kerlin’s anthology (Watkins 1923, 236–38).

Claude McKay’s “Harlem Dancer” and “Invocation” appeared in *Seven Arts* in 1917 and “If We Must Die” was published in *Liberator* in 1919; in 1922, his poetry collection *Harlem Shadows* appeared in print.<sup>12</sup> Also in 1922, Du Bois, following on from his earlier drama contest, established a short story competition in *Crisis*, hoping for a more enthusiastic response and higher yield than his earlier call in 1912. Also in 1922, Georgia Douglas Johnson’s second book of poetry *Bronze*<sup>13</sup> was published and three poems by Zora Neale Hurston appeared in Marcus Garvey’s *Negro World* (McEwen 2010, 93–94; Croft 2002, 198; Wall 1995, 146). As mentioned above, black magazines and newspapers in the 1910s published creative literature that operated within the social, cultural, and political energies of the New Negro Movement in literature. Added to these publications, some New Negro literature appeared in magazines and newspapers with primarily white readerships.

New Negro literature was thus well underway before the *Opportunity* and *Crisis* awards in 1925 and before Alain Locke, a participant in the New Negro Movement in literature since at least 1916, had edited the special issue of *Survey Graphic* and the anthology *The New Negro*. Following the war’s end in 1918, white philanthropists gave the already active literary segment of the New Negro era an infusion of financial support, which made possible Charles S. Johnson’s *Opportunity* magazine dinner and led to the publication of greater numbers of New Negro writers in white-owned venues. These expanded opportunities raised New Negro hopes for increased opportunities to reach a general readership. This patronage sustained the literary awards and supported artists and writers such as Hurston, Hughes, and others, although according to some commentators



it effectively controlled their literary production. Charles Johnson's editorial position, when announcing the awards in *Opportunity*, explicitly emphasized their call for literature that was "free of deliberate propaganda and protest" (Lewis 1981, 97), surely looking to circumvent the type of literature published by Du Bois and to appeal to the prominent magazine editors and powerful publishing house representatives who attended the *Opportunity* dinner, such as Harper and Brothers, Boni and Liveright, Harcourt and Brace (Joel Spingarn was one of the founders), Knopf (close friends of Carl Van Vechten), and Paul Kellogg from *Survey Graphic*. An examination of a wide range of New Negro Movement literature from 1915 to 1930 demonstrates that there is very little that will distinguish between the best literature published in 1915 and the best of 1929, much of which operated firmly within the cultural, political, and social energies of the New Negro Movement in literature.

New Negro literary art from 1929, the last active year of the New Negro Movement in literature, includes Countee Cullen's *Black Christ and Other Poems*, Wallace Thurman's Broadway play *Harlem* and his novel *The Blacker the Berry*, Claude McKay's *Banjo*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, and Jesse Fauset's *Plum Bun*. Langston Hughes begrudgingly wrote *Not Without Laughter* at the insistence of his patron, and submitted the manuscript to his publisher in that year (Rampersad 1986, 197, 176). In 1930, Hughes's only novel appeared in print and he received the Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes, the last successful year for the awards. Submissions to and participation in the Harmon awards declined after 1930 and by 1933 the awards, which were offered in fields well beyond literature (i.e., education, business, and other endeavors), were no longer offered (*Against the Odds* 2006). The year 1930 also brought Hughes and Hurston together on their collaborative project *Mule Bone*, which resulted in a permanent breach in their relationship and the end of Hughes's relationship with Charlotte Osgood Mason, the patron he and Hurston had shared.

In the January 1929 issue of *Opportunity*, Alain Locke claimed that the high point of the New Negro Movement in literature was "inspired and kept alive" by white patrons and had ended when their support ceased (1929, 9). Charles Johnson's *Opportunity* magazine literature contest had presented its first awards in 1925 and by September 1927, after merely three rounds of awards, the editors suspended it, never really resuming their initial emphasis. Du Bois discontinued the *Crisis* literary competitions after the Charles Chesnutt Award in 1928, which now suffered the same fate as *Opportunity*'s contest. Some New Negro Movement writers continued to publish well into the 1930s and beyond, but the numerous activities



other than publications—such as awards, social events, Broadway shows, and artistic gatherings—that had identified the movement had come to an end.<sup>14</sup> Throughout their careers, writers such as Hurston, Fauset, George Schuyler, Hughes, and Sterling Brown<sup>15</sup> retained lingering themes and aesthetic concerns from the New Negro Movement in literature, such as the use of vernacular speech and realistic depictions of folk materials (including urban folk), music, biting satire, and representations of New Negro middle-class life. As scholars of the literary movement have noted, these were all issues that had occupied the considerations of Du Bois and other New Negroes for a substantial period of time even before the literary movement (Bell 1985; Gabbin 1993; Melton 2010).

After 1929 the editors of *Crisis* continued to publish literature, yet the editorial influence of George Schuyler from the mid-1930s until the mid-1940s is clearly a departure from Du Bois, who resigned from the NAACP in 1934. Also in 1934, Dorothy West unsuccessfully attempted to revive the New Negro Movement literary energies with the launch of her magazine *Challenge*, and she made a second attempt in collaboration with Richard Wright and Marian Minus in 1937 with *New Challenge*. The New Negro literary energies clearly no longer existed at West's first attempt. Moreover, unlike the conditions that made it possible for Langston Hughes, Dorothy West, Wallace Thurman, Sterling Brown, Helene Johnson, Contee Cullen and others to join a movement that included Fenton Johnson, Angelina Weld Grimké, W. E. B. Du Bois, Anne Spencer, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and Georgia Douglas Johnson, the number of new writers operating through the literary, social, and political energies of the New Negro Movement in literature was negligible throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The New Negro Movement in literature, accordingly, had ended by the close of 1930.

In fact, the specific environment that had made the height of the New Negro Movement literature possible was no longer in place. Fissures at the center of the economic structures of the United States had shifted the nation's financial and economic systems, leading to dwindling fortunes for many of the philanthropists and some of the major publishers that had supported the movement. Funding from the Works Progress Administration and the Works Projects Administration—Federal Writers Project replaced patronage and philanthropy for the arts (Franklin 1947, 503–504). Additionally, the lived reality of black life shifted along with wider social patterns across the United States, creating a new environment for black writers. The lives of substantial numbers of urban black people in the laboring classes were moving toward unemployment, and some people in the black middle class were rapidly slipping into economic decline.



New Negro life and the conditions required for New Negro writers to write about it changed substantially and produced a fundamentally different literature in the 1930s. A host of literary, social, cultural, and political energies defining the environment in the 1930s differed from the environment informing the earlier period of the New Negro Movement in literature, and any list would have to include: the new economic realities; the developing prestige of modernist aesthetics; continuing segregation in the United States' military; increasing migration of black people into urban centers (North and South); the rising momentum of the labor movement; publishers calling for so-called "raceless" literature; and governmental support of the arts replacing private patronage and philanthropy. Literature produced by black writers between 1936 and 1949, beginning with the publication of Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1936) and ending with Gwendolyn Brooks's *Annie Allen* (1949), marks the next significant African American literary movement—the Black Chicago Writers. Literature by Frank Marshall Davis, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes (who participated in all three major African American literary movements), and others whom Davarian Baldwin aptly refers to as "Chicago's New Negroes" (2007), brought together strong literary energies to form another literary movement, but with a different configuration focused on Chicago, a significant site of African American culture.

The New Negro Movement in literature from 1915 until 1930 was a significant era in the making of African American literature and the literature of the United States. A crucial legacy of this literary movement is its formal experimentation, which produced a few markedly modernist texts such as Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and Marita Bonner's *Purple Flower* (1928), as well as Bruce Nugent's "Smoke, Lillies, and Jade" (1926) and "Sahdji" (1925). More prevalent, though, was the literary experimentation that has resulted in literary forms that have remained stable in African American literature and consequently have expanded the literary terrain of the US. Foremost among these forms of literature are: protest sonnets (Emanuel 1975; Smith 1984); blues and jazz poetry, along with the extensive use of music in narrative; African American speculative and detective fiction; the black sermonic; lynching literature; passing narratives; embedded liberation narratives; embedded emancipation narratives; and African heritage literature, including numerous Africa poems, perhaps the least understood of the forms.<sup>16</sup>

The US has a long history of protest literature beginning at least with revolutionary era writing and the numerous abolitionist writings of the nineteenth century. Among African Americans, protest occurred in the



resistant writings of precursors such as Phillis Wheatley and Richard Allen in the eighteenth century, in revisions of the problematical nineteenth century tragic mulatta/o narrative by William Wells Brown (resulting in the African American passing narrative), and in the liberation/freedom narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, which have influenced the embedding of liberation and emancipation narratives in subsequent African American literature, including the New Negro Movement in literature. The nineteenth century protest poems of Frances E. W. Harper should also be included here. Such protests in literature predated the New Negro experiments with the sonnet. Writers of the protest sonnet, which is typically associated with Claude McKay but is also found in the poetry of Countee Cullen, Helene Johnson, Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr., and others, claimed an abandoned form and gave it unexpected content. Sometimes New Negro writers, such as Helene Johnson in "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem," simultaneously deploy and critique the sonnet in a New Negro challenge to normative models of "civilization."

Additionally, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and James Weldon Johnson were formal innovators in their experiments with jazz and blues poetry and other musically informed literature, and, in the case of Johnson, the use of black sermonic. In narrative, Wallace Thurman, Nella Larsen, Langston Hughes, among numerous others, employ music to great effect. The use of black music in literature, especially jazz poetry, has now expanded well beyond African Americans. In terms of fiction, Du Bois's experiment in the short story "The Comet" (1920) imagines other worlds and provides an example of New Negro Movement speculative fiction, adding to earlier speculative fiction such as Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1903). Some of Rudolph Fisher's short stories include brief prototypes of his black detective, which would receive full treatment in his novel published in 1932. Lynching dramas such as Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* appeared very early in the New Negro Movement literature, and her short story, "Goldie" (1920), originally titled "The Creaking", focused on the actual lynching of a pregnant woman, Mary Turner. Lynching literature during the New Negro Movement operated within the political and social energies of the anti-lynching efforts of Ida B. Wells Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, the Tuskegee Institute, and the NAACP. Other New Negro writers of lynching literature include Georgia Douglas Johnson, who coined the term "lynching literature," Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Helene Johnson, Langston Hughes, Walter White, and Anne Spencer (Mitchell 2011). Lynching Literature, similar to protest literature and jazz poetry, while predominantly associated with New Negro writers, also included white authors.



As with protest literature and African heritage literature, passing narratives produced by New Negro Movement writers remade their predecessor form for the modern age. If, for instance, James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912, 1927) seems to represent passing from an era other than the New Negro Movement, perhaps that is because this novel was the product of another time. Johnson's lamenting narrator seems anachronistic in comparison to Nella Larsen's ironic turns on the motif and in terms of the varieties of passing found in her fiction, including her novel *Passing* (1929), with its mocking of society's racial narratives. Both writers, however, lodge clear critiques of the illogical nature of hypodescent and the odd notion of miscegenation, yet neither Johnson nor Larsen gives readers a tragic mulatta/o, which New Negro Movement writer Sterling Brown, in "Alas the Poor Mulatto" and in "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," posits as a character found primarily in literature by white writers (Brown 1933a, 91; 1933b, 192–96).<sup>17</sup>

Another modern aspect of the New Negro era was its participants valuing of African influences that had persisted in New Negro culture and to become participants in a "transnational modern black"<sup>18</sup> project to transform a maligned heritage into a significant one. The African heritage poem, which also has a history located in the eighteenth century, was a primary mechanism for New Negroes to accomplish this realignment of Africa. And toward that end, Du Bois regularly resituated Egypt in the *Crisis* back in Africa as one among many strategies to battle against what he saw as "the silence and neglect of science [that] can let truth utterly disappear or even be unconsciously distorted" (1939, vii). The realignment of Africa in *Crisis* resulted in cover art such as the several renderings of African themes by Laura Wheeler Waring, including "Woman Playing the Harp" (April 1923), "Africa in America" (June 1924), and "The Strength of Africa" (September 1924). Art by Aaron Douglas also contributed to the theme of Africa during the New Negro era, including his poster for the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre of Harlem in the *Crisis* (May 1926) and his cover for the first and only issue of *Fire!!* (November 1926), edited and produced by Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Bruce, Gwendolyn Bennett, and John Davis. As the United States in general turned inward, focusing on Americanization, deemphasizing ethnicity, and limiting immigration (Kirschke 2007, 132–39), Du Bois and other New Negro writers revived an image of Africa so that it would not become subsumed in the "vogue."

With Africa as a recurrent theme, one might expect then that many of the prominent New Negro writers would certainly have possessed complex knowledge about Africa and some of its peoples in the modern world.



African Americans had had a long history of travel to Africa from the United States since at least 1787, when the British established Sierra Leone and settled formerly enslaved black people who had fought as Loyalists during the Revolutionary War for Independence. Some antebellum journeys to Africa resulted from nefarious “repatriation schemes,” while other such travel was undertaken voluntarily (Campbell 2006, 16, 187–267). Yet, New Negro writers of heritage poems often present an imagined, uncomplicated Africa and sometimes an Africa entangled in “vogue” primitivism. Examples would include such poems as: Gwendolyn Bennett’s “To Usward” (1924) and “Heritage” (1923); Fenton Johnson’s “Ethiopia” (1915); Langston Hughes’s “Danse Africaine” (1924) and “Afro-American Fragment” (1930); Lucian B. Watkins’s “Star of Ethiopia” (1922); Claude McKay’s “Heritage” (1922) and “Africa” (1921); Helene Johnson’s “Bottled” (1927); and most notably, Countee Cullen’s “Heritage” (1925). The New Negro’s Africa clearly was a product of the imaginary of each writer, even though some had traveled to Africa, had participated in the Pan-African Conferences and Congresses of 1900, 1919, 1921, 1923, and 1927, or had known Africans living in the United States, such as the New Negro Movement in literature writer Gladys May Casely Hayford (Aquah Lualaba), who was from present day Ghana and whose maternal heritage was in Sierra Leone.<sup>19</sup> While New Negro representations of Africa are as varied as the writers who have made them, we might safely say that Africa operated in most New Negro literature to rearrange the script of “civilization” and reconnect the New Negro to an ancient heritage. In this way, the New Negroes expanded their psychological (if not their geographical) terrain so that a revived Africa and a concomitant acknowledgement of Pan-African connections made possible the reinvention of Africa. This enabled a remaking of the Old Negro into the New Negro as Pan-African, or, for Edwards, “transnational black modern” (Edwards 2003, 72) subject.

As “transnational black modern[s],” New Negro Movement writers explored Africa as a discursive site where solidarity could occur across entrenched systems and structures of assumed racial superiority and internalized supremacist logic. They also recognized historical connections—specifically the multiply-located European markets that had trafficked in humans as property—that made solidarity possible and often necessary. These ideas were part of the energies that informed and shaped the production of New Negro Movement African heritage literature. Moreover, New Negro Movement literature extended to other parts of the Black World and their diasporic vision circulated with in the United States through a variety of mechanisms: the circulation of New



Negro Movement literature in print along with reports on Africa in black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and other periodicals; the travels of New Negro writers to Africa, Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, and South America; and the appearance of Langston Hughes's translations of Nicolás Guillén's "Madrigal" in *Opportunity* and of Gustavo Urrutia's "Students of Yesterday" in the *Crisis* (Mullen 1977; Rampersad 1986, 203). This circulation of literature influenced the development of similar language and literary movements in the African diaspora, such as Afro-criollo, Negrismo, and Nègritude (Sharpley-Whiting 2002; Jackson 2008). Indeed, Lesley Feracho fittingly reminds us that the "exchanges extended in all directions within and across geographic and linguistic borders" (1999–2000, 8). Thus, an unquestionably locally grounded Pan-African New Negro emerged in the modern world determined to change the scripts of colonialism, imperialism, injustice, and Jim Crow.

A primary aim of the New Negro Movement in literature was to shatter the enforced silence of the "Old Negro" with the literary voices of New Negroes. In doing so, the movement was able to make the old and the new visible to the world through alternative epistemologies expressed in literature that esteemed and respected multiple aspects of African American and African Diasporic culture. The wider social and political project of the New Negro, which I locate chronologically from at least 1895 until 1965, intersected with the New Negro Movement in literature from 1915 until 1930. The New Negroes entered the terrain of epistemological uncertainty, participated in creating a modern Black World, and seized a place for themselves in modernity.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> While many people have used Amiri Baraka's title for his complex poem, "Black Art" (1966) and the title of Larry Neal's essay in the *Drama Review*, "The Black Arts Movement" (1968), as their markers for referring to this literary movement, Larry Neal's term "Black Arts Movement/Black Art Aesthetic" presented in "Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic" (1971) more accurately accounts for the full spectrum of literary activities during this cultural movement. This wide scope is represented in the usage here.
- <sup>2</sup> Some scholars have recognized the concentration of black women novelists in the 1980s as a movement among black women writers and have referred to this literary movement under various titles including Womanist-AfraFemme Writers or Black Feminist Writers.
- <sup>3</sup> The terms Western culture, the West, as well as similar constructions will be used to refer to European, British, and Euro-American cultures, recognizing



the problematical ways in which such terms operate within a binary of East/Oriental and West/Occidental together with their supremacist and colonial implications. Their use here suggests only a rhetorical convenience rather than alignment with the attitudes that have shaped the terms.

- <sup>4</sup> Similar contestations of modernism may also exist in colonial literatures published during the period of the New Negro Movement in literature in the United States. For a view of the ways that African literature has contested modernism see Nicholas Brown's *Utopian Generations* (2005), although Brown's account is problematical for its totalizing project as well as its uncritical use of the terms "Third World" and "First World."
- <sup>5</sup> Washington's autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901) reports that Page nominated him for the position of secretary for the jury evaluating the exhibits on education at the Atlanta Exposition. Among Page's various examples of violence is the Samuel Hose case, which Du Bois also wrote about and which was subsequently and widely believed to have involved self-defense. The National Negro Convention Movement dates from 1830 when a group of free black people gathered to address their concerns with inequality experienced by free black people and to strategize approaches to the abolition of slavery. The height of their activities occurred before the Civil War, yet African Americans continued to hold periodic conventions throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at which point the issue of Jim Crow segregation and continued inequalities shaped the discussions.
- <sup>6</sup> Harrison and Garvey made the first attempt in 1917 to launch a mass New Negro movement.
- <sup>7</sup> Williams's narrative, *The Letters of Davy Carr: A True Story of Colored Vanity Fair*, was serialized in the *Messenger* from 1925 through 1926. Its reissue in novel form in 2004 was oddly retitled *When Washington Was in Vogue*. The new title elides the crucial class issues transformed by color that Williams, a professional librarian, makes with his references to earlier novels, notably William Makepeace Thackeray's serialized novel *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* (1847–48). Similarly, the allusion to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), to which Thackeray refers, is lost. Jessie Fauset also alludes to Thackeray in her novel *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* (1928), which focuses on class and color.
- <sup>8</sup> Toward the end of the 1940s, Locke divided his time between his permanent position at Howard University and visiting positions at the New School and City College. He established a permanent residence in New York after his retirement from Howard in 1953.
- <sup>9</sup> In May 1926, Aaron Douglas made a poster ad that was printed in *Crisis* advertising Krigwa and in July 1926 Du Bois published Krigwa's purpose statement in *Crisis*. There he called for dramatic art "about us," "by us," "for us," and "near us." This statement reformulates a similar comment by Du Bois in 1915, in which he made reference to his pageant, then titled *The Star of Ethiopia*, as a production "given for Negroes and by Negroes."



- <sup>10</sup> Du Bois had a number of working titles for his pageant, including *The Star of Ethiopia*, *The Seven Gifts of Ethiopia*, *Pageant of Negro History*, and *The Jewel of Ethiopia*.
- <sup>11</sup> Despite Chesnutt's refusal to align with the New Negro Movement in the 1920s either socially or as a writer, he nonetheless was respected by New Negroes, and the editors at *Crisis* named a literary award in his honor. Chesnutt's short story collection *The Conjure Woman* (1899) was reprinted in 1928. His unpublished novels, written during the era, were not published until well after his death in 1928.
- <sup>12</sup> McKay had published *Spring in New Hampshire* in England in 1920, and a US edition appeared in print in 1922. While some of the poems in this slim collection clearly express the sensibilities of the New Negroes, the book primarily operates outside the realm of New Negro literature.
- <sup>13</sup> This was Johnson's second book of poetry, written after New Negro criticisms of her first book, *Heart of a Woman* (1918), as being too alienated from Negro life.
- <sup>14</sup> While the number of publications in any one year during the 1930s was typically small, several books by New Negro Movement in literature writers did appear throughout the decade: Jessie Redmon Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931); George Schuyler's *Slaves Today* (1931); Arna Bontemps's *God Sends Sunday* (1931) and his novel *Black Thunder* (1936), although this latter operates outside the thematics of New Negro Movement literature because of its historical focus on slavery, a topic that New Negro Movement writers tended to avoid except as embedded narratives; Sterling Brown's *Southern Road*'s 1932; Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932); Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932); Zora Neale Hurston's short story "The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933), and from 1931 to 1939 three novels as well as ethnographic articles and two collections of her ethnographic work (Singh 1976).
- <sup>15</sup> Charlotte Osgood Mason was Langston Hughes's and Zora Neale Hurston's patron. She supported Hurston in the 1930s, as Mason's fortune seems to have survived the crash. Until 1975, Sterling Brown's was unable to secure a contract for his second book of poetry. Jesse Fauset's work with *Crisis* gave her ample contacts in the publishing world.
- <sup>16</sup> Cheryl K. Wall in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* uses the term "African re-connection" poems (1995, 22).
- <sup>17</sup> See Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Quadroon Girl" (1842); Lydia Maria Child's short stories "The Quadroons" (1842) and "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" (1843); Thomas Mayne Reid's novel *The Quadroon* (1856); and Dion Boucicault's play *The Octoroon* (1859). Most antebellum tragic mulatta/o literature was well-meaning abolitionist literature.
- <sup>18</sup> Brent Edwards refers to a "transnational black modern culture" (2003, 72); yet I continue to maintain with Fanon that culture is national (216), even as it transforms, intersects or connects with transnational elements for its own uses. See also Tunde Adeleke (1998) for another perspective on Pan-Africanism.



- <sup>19</sup> Du Bois traveled in 1923 and 1924 to Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. Locke's grandmother was born in Liberia. Hughes had traveled to West Africa in 1923 and later was a Lincoln University classmate and friend of Nnamdi Azikwe, a Nigerian, who would become his nation's first president (Obiwu 2007). McKay spent time in North Africa. Jessie Redmon Fauset, author of *There is Confusion* (1924) and *Plum Bun* (1928), represented the NAACP at the London Pan-African Congress in 1921. In her report on the events Fauset announced, "We were all one family in London" (1921, 12).

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